

Letters from a Sandburg Docent

February 2026

John W. Quinley

Hi all,

I started publishing letters about Sandburg just over two years ago. This is my last one. It describes the honors Sandburg received and talks about his legacy.

Some of you have been receiving these letters from the start while others were added to the mailing list in recent months. All the letters are posted on the website of the Carl Sandburg Historic Site Association in Galesburg, Illinois at <https://www.sandburg.org/>.

I am planning to publish a new book called *Letters from a Docent* in a few months. I've selected two dozen letters from the series to tell the story of Sandburg's life. The book is illustrated with black and white drawings. I'll let you know when it is available.

Sandburg is a man to be remembered, a man of many lives. He deserves to regain his place in the hearts of Americans. It's time for a comeback.

I hope you have enjoyed the series.

Thanks for reading,

John

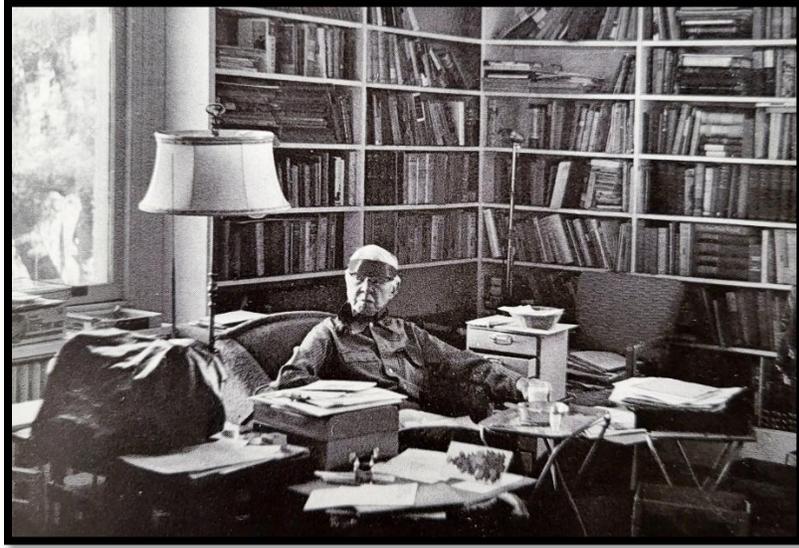
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Honors and Legacy

Dear Readers,

There was a time when nearly everyone knew the name Carl Sandburg. He wrote more than a thousand poems, tens of thousands of newspaper stories, and more than forty books on subjects ranging from poetry and journalism to musicology, fairy tales, biographies, and historical fiction. A complete bibliography of his works, including contributions to periodicals and anthologies, forewords, introductions, and foreign editions would number more than four hundred pages.

He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and received thirty-two honorary doctoral degrees. He won two Pulitzer Prizes in poetry and a gold medal from the Poetry Society of America. Other honors include a Pulitzer Prize in history, gold medals from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and from King Gustavus of Sweden, and a Grammy for his narration of Aaron Copeland's *A Lincoln Portrait*. He won the first Albert

Einstein Commemorative Award in the Humanities and was the first white person to receive a lifetime membership from the NAACP. Roy Wilkins, the Executive Director, wrote that Sandburg, “has strengthened our vision as we struggle to extend the frontiers of social justice. We salute Carl Sandburg who found beauty in brotherhood.”

The states of Illinois and North Carolina declared a day in his honor; the Kennedy White House held an evening celebrating him; President Johnson awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom; the Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp honoring the centenary of his birth; the first high-rise complex built on Lakeshore Drive in Chicago was named the Sandburg Towers; and more than two dozen schools and colleges were named in his honor.

The public bought his books and eagerly read his newspaper columns. His writings were discussed in schools throughout the country, perhaps more than any other poet. Sandburg scholar Joseph Epstein wrote that, “Sandburg enjoyed the kind of fame in his lifetime which, among American writers, perhaps only Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway had in theirs, and Sandburg’s was probably greater.”

To explain why Sandburg was so celebrated in mid-century, Sandburg scholar, Philip Yannella, wrote:

Partly it was because he was an extraordinary writer who, at his best, could eloquently express the concerns of ordinary Americans. He could say what they wanted to say but could not, and he could say it in a way that sounded, sometimes, almost biblical; he could write and talk history with sensitivity and conviction, but in plain English; he could write poems average people could understand and remember; and he behaved like a regular fellow rather than like the hypersensitive, effete snob-poet of popular legend. Partly it was because he was a charismatic, spellbinding public performer with a full and rich voice, a broad, happy smile, a boyish charm even as an old man, and a healthy bearing that seemed to exude self-confidence, happiness, and, most of all, genuine enjoyment of all the things he had done and continued to do.

Illinois governor, ambassador to the United Nations, and presidential candidate, Adlai Stevenson wrote that “Carl Sandburg is the one living man whose work and whose life epitomize the American dream.”

He has the earthiness of the prairies, the majesty of mountains, the anger of deep inland seas. In his is the restlessness of the seeker, the questioner, the explorer of far horizons, the hunger that is never satisfied. In him also in the tough strength that has never been fully measured, never unleashed, the resiliency of youthfulness which wells from within, and which no one can destroy.

By the time of his death at age eighty-nine, Carl Sandburg had become a cultural icon. Six thousand mourners gathered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., to pay their respects. Ambassadors, members of Congress, Supreme Court justices, and President Lyndon B. Johnson were present. Authors Mark Van Doren and Archibald MacLeish delivered eulogies and guitarist Charlie Byrd played folksongs. The dignitaries present stood for all sides of the eclectic Sandburg: social activist, political commentator and journalist; poet and philosopher; lecturer, folk singer, and musicologist; biographer and historian; children's book author; novelist; and celebrity, recording artist, and media figure.

In his eulogy to Sandburg, President Johnson said:

Carl Sandburg needs no epitaph. It is written for all time in the fields, the cities, the face and heart of the land he loved and the people he celebrated and inspired. With the world, we mourn his passing. It is our pride and fortune as Americans that we will always hear Carl Sandburg's voice within ourselves; for he gave us the truest and most enduring vision of our own greatness.

Despite a diminished profile in the years since his passing, Sandburg's poetry is still in print, along with a good bit of his prose. He left us a great literary legacy: his monumental biography of Lincoln; his hundreds of poems; the songs in the *Songbag* that we still sing today; the quirky stories from Rootabaga country; and his passion for social justice and unwavering support of democracy. Biographer Penelope Niven wrote that Sandburg told "the American nation about itself, its weakness, and strengths, its past and promise." He was a citizen who saw a bright future for the nation:

*I see America, not in the setting sun of a black night of despair ahead of us.
I see America in the crimson light of a rising sun
Fresh from the burning, creative hand of God.*

I see great days ahead,

Great days possible to men and women of will and vision.

He is a man to be remembered, a man of many lives. He deserves to regain his place in the hearts of Americans. It's time for a comeback.

Thanks for reading,

John

John Quinley is the author of the book *Discovering Carl Sandburg*, the play *The Many Lives of Carl Sandburg*, and the print series *Letters from a Docent*. He is a former docent at the Carl Sandburg Home in Flat Rock, North Carolina. You may contact John at jwquinley@gmail.com